



7 Tips for social media on a budget

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Feb. 11, 2012

How a restaurant company addresses social media with limited resources

Managing social media with tight resources, including limited budgets and manpower, can be very challenging without the right approach. It's not about managing this realm with bigger teams or more assets. It's about implementing the right strategy to operate smarter in this space. The following seven tips can help achieve a successful business driving social media presence:

1. Understand the commitment.

Navigating social media the right way demands dedication and time. When The Melting Pot Restaurants assigned a full time role to manage its social media presence in 2009, the primary objective was to listen to the noise on social media first before developing a platform.

Understanding the time commitment, which included nights and weekends, was the social media program's turning point. The Melting Pot grew from just 4,000 fans on Facebook and no presence on any other social site to almost 400,000 fans across all Melting Pot Facebook pages. It also grew an active and engaging presence on Twitter, Linked In, Foursquare, Foodspotting, Yelp, Urbanspoon and more – driving traffic into the restaurants and recovering tens of thousands of dollars through guest recovery.

2. Invest in an affordable tool.

Most social media monitoring or full-engagement tools on the marketplace are not affordable for small to mid-sized companies or conducive to the company's true needs. There are some free tools like Hootsuite, Tweetdeck and Co-Tweet that can help manage a company's presence across multiple sites, but as the future of social media continues to shift more localized than ever before, a more advanced tool is necessary to monitor the brand and ensure its integrity remains intact at the local level.

Fans of The Melting Pot, for example, really want to engage at the local level and are passionate about developing the localized connection. With over 140 locations in North America and continued growth internationally, a local social media strategy is difficult to manage. Based on needs and budget constraints, we worked with a developer who built a customized tool called Zeepli, (www.zeepli.com), that monitors all of our location activity and ensures social media brand compliance system-wide.

3. Listen and respond.

Is leading the conversation important? Absolutely, but listening and responding is crucial to a company's survival in this space. The Melting Pot receives over 300 search results on Twitter every day and responds to every tweet and Facebook post about the brand. Listening to fans and followers is crucial as this is the new platform for fan engagement, guest recovery and crisis communications.

4. Leverage partnerships.

Team up with brands to leverage partnerships across social media. Foodspotting, for example, is waiving its monthly fee for The Melting Pot in exchange for brand recognition on collateral pieces, in-store, through the Club Fondue loyalty email program and more.

5. Capitalize on the company's niche.

What does your company do that no other company can claim? Exploit that niche and raise awareness about these unique attributes. After discovering National Cheese Fondue Day was a real day in April, The Melting Pot partnered with its cheese vendor to capitalize on this day with a system-wide event offering free cheese fondue over a four-day period at all locations, increasing traffic and inciting trial among new guests.

With public relations and social media as primary communications vehicles for this promotion, the company accomplished the following:

- 43 percent of guests were first timers
- 14 percent increase in sales
- 37 percent increase in guest counts

6. Bring digital development in house.

If a digital developer is not already on staff, consider hiring one. This role's job description should include social media support, which saves the company money so that every task does not have to be outsourced to vendor partners. Small graphical improvements, tab or application creation and website construction could transform a vanilla presence to one that makes an impact.

7. Manage expectations, track traffic and report results.

Many executives do not understand this space or the benefit of maintaining a presence here. On the contrary, some executives think throwing money at a specific medium will produce overnight results that translate into sales.

Managing expectations related to manpower and budget will establish the groundwork to build a successful platform achievable within the company's constraints. Tracking traffic and reporting results are key tactics that validate projections and expectations.

By tackling these seven tips, limited budgets and resources will not stand in the way of success as companies strive to work smarter, evaluate worth, find value and progress with true traffic driving and sales generating methods.

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